

THE WINNING ENTRIES FOR

The Young Walter Scott Prize 2017

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ABOUT THE YOUNG WALTER SCOTT PRIZE

Published anonymously in July 1814, *Waverley* is generally regarded as the world's first historical novel. It was set around the time of the Jacobite uprising of 1745 and quickly became so popular that the author – Walter Scott – had no need to remain anonymous. Indeed, he quickly became internationally famous on a scale few other writers have achieved since.

The Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction was founded in 2010 with the support of the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch, distant kinsmen of the great novelist. Every year since, it has been awarded at the **Borders Book Festival** in Melrose, near Abbotsford, the home Sir Walter Scott created on the banks of the River Tweed. The Walter Scott Prize live event at the festival celebrates the best newly published historical fiction.

It made complete sense, then, given the long tradition of historical fiction for young people, to establish the **Young Walter Scott Prize** for unpublished writers aged 11 to 19 years – and the first winners, Joe Bradley and Rosi Byard-Jones – were presented with their prizes in 2016. In the three years since we have seen a steady rise in the number of entries from all over the UK, covering an extraordinary range of historical periods. This year's judges – novelist Elizabeth Laird, literary agent Kathryn Ross and the Director of the Young Walter Scott Prize, Alan Caig Wilson, deliberated long and hard before making the final selection published in this anthology.

Alongside the competition, a programme of **Imagining History** workshops are run all over the UK by Prize Director Alan Caig Wilson. These offer groups of young people a unique opportunity to explore sites and buildings of historical interest – including Boughton in Northamptonshire, Blickling House in Norfolk, Sutton Hoo in Suffolk and Trinity House of Leith in Edinburgh. The Imagining

History workshops – which often take participants behind the scenes to places to which the public is not usually given access - encourage active historical research, together with guidance on how to start writing inspired by the experience.

There is more information about the competition – including previous winning stories and the entry form which must accompany each entry - and the Imagining History programme, on the Young Walter Scott website.

Both the Walter Scott Prize and the Young Walter Scott Prize are supported by the **Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch** and the **Buccleuch Living Heritage Trust**.

Young Walter Scott Prize winners

2015 Joe Bradley and Rosi Byard-Jones

2016 Demelza Mason and Alice Sargent

Walter Scott Prize winners

2010 *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel

2011 *The Long Song* by Andrea Levy

2012 *On Canaan's Side* by Sebastian Barry

2013 *The Garden of Evening Mists* by Tan Twan Eng

2014 *An Officer and a Spy* by Robert Harris

2015 *The Ten Thousand Things* by John Spurling

2016 *Tigh trope* by Simon Mawer

2017 *Days Without End* by Sebastian Barry

MIRANDA BARRETT
Twickenham, London

*Winner of The Young Walter Scott Prize
16 to 19 age-group*

THE NEW NEIGHBOURS

Miranda Barrett

(Lights up. A fifties kitchen/dining room. All bright yellows and blues. Low end of middle class. BARBARA HOLLY, thirties, red skirt and blouse. She's taken a cake out the oven and is looking at it as if deciding whether to throw it away. In a chair to the side of the table is JEFF HOLLY, early forties, reading a newspaper. If not for her discomfort, it'd be the picture of a domestic home. After a few seconds CHARLES HOLLY, nine, bolts through the door)

CHARLES: Mommy! Mommy! There's a coloured girl playing on the lawn!

BARBARA: *(dismissively)* Yeah, I know, dear. *(It clicks)* Wait... On the lawn?

CHARLES: Yeah, on the front lawn!

BARBARA: Well, who's she with?

CHARLES: She's talkin' with Louise!

(they both half start to the door; Jeff doesn't move)

BARBARA: Is she still there?

(Charles runs out to check. Comes back in)

CHARLES: Nah, she's gone now. Who is she?

BARBARA: I told you, remember, it's the new neighbours. The Miltons. They're... from the South.

CHARLES: You mean they're-

JEFF: Coloured, is the word you're looking for, Charles.

CHARLES: Oh. I've never seen a coloured kid around before.

JEFF: Sure you have. On the television.

CHARLES: Yeah but I sure haven't seen one in school.

BARBARA: Well, she and her brother are going to be the first.

CHARLES: She got a brother?

BARBARA: Yeah, she does.

(Charles starts to wander off)

BARBARA: *(falteringly)* Maybe you could- maybe you could play ball together.

(Charles stares at her blankly, then walks off.)

BARBARA: We got a cake last year, the Jones' last year, the Thompsons the year before- hell, even the Mayfields get one at Christmas, and their Joe's a crook! We all know he's a crook!

JEFF: Hmm.

BARBARA: And that man does not wash.

JEFF: *(dark agreement)* Hmmm.

BARBARA: You remember that? When we moved in? The table was piled high. Bell ringing every half hour. But it's been three days, and let me tell you, not one woman's been to next door.

JEFF: How'd you know that?

BARBARA: I've been watching through the curtains like some spy!

JEFF: Hm.

BARBARA: I don't know what to do. *(He is silent)* Thing is, I'm really stuck on this one, Jeff. It's a real conundrum.

JEFF: Hmm.

BARBARA: Weighing up the evidence and... I just don't know. *(Pause)* Jeff, are you listening to me? I could really use some advice on this one.

JEFF: *(Looking up)* Sweetheart, what do you want me to say?

BARBARA: Well, what do you think? Should I deliver the cake? You always give good advice.

JEFF: To the door? With all the women on the street looking at you? Well, I suppose there's no other way to do it. Unless- what sort of cake is it?

BARBARA: Chocolate, why?

JEFF: (*grins*) Seems apt.

BARBARA: Oh, stop it!

JEFF: Hey, no- well, look. We got a saying up at the office. Stick to your guns. You know? Whatever you do, you can't half ass it. You gotta go all the way. So if you deliver that cake, you deliver it with smiles, and gracious welcomings, and invites and all the rest of it. But if you don't, well, then you gotta act like you never even heard of the concept of baked goods. And you got to stick to that too.

BARBARA: (*giggles*) You are funny. (*pause. He goes back to his newspaper. When she speaks again, he half rolls his eyes*) I just- I feel like it's the right thing to do, you know? But then we got our own lives to think about, you know, that's the thing with these higher ideals, they don't think one bit about your own life.

JEFF: This whole civil rights thing got you real riled up, huh?

BARBARA: (*hesitates*) I don't want the kids growing up all narrow minded, you know? And I am not big on all this 'free love' stuff that's coming out, not at all- but there's a difference between thinking you're the centre of the world and knowing there's other stuff out there too. You know? Even if you don't ever see it, it's like- empathy. Yeah, I want the kids to have empathy. Especially Mary, she's awful impressionable.

JEFF: You're an intelligent woman, Barbara. That's why I married you.

BARBARA: (*smiling as he kisses her*) Thank you, dear.

JEFF: (*pause*) That being said, if she's not grateful, don't be surprised, you know. That's just the way she'll be. Just like those protesters- after 1954 everyone thought they'd be happy, you know, in the Brown case. Mixed schools and everything, and at a damn inconvenience to said schools. But four years later and they're still at it. Just the way it is. Nature versus nurture.

BARBARA: Jeff, don't say things like that-

JEFF: Hey, now, come on! I'm no bigot. I served with a boy in the army.

BARBARA: I know, Jeff. John...

JEFF: John Castle, we ate together, we slept together, we got shot at together- And he were just as good as any member of our regiment. He was a fine man. *(Pause)* Shame we didn't keep in touch, I could've introduced him, done this whole "empathy" thing for you.

BARBARA: You're no fool, Jeff.

JEFF: Damn right I'm not.

BARBARA: *(admiringly)* You got so angry when you heard 'bout all the troops getting beat up when they came back...

JEFF: I tell you, if I'd have been there, I would've gunned down half of Texas. *(checks his watch)* I better go help Charlie with his homework. *(Looks at her)* This is really worrying you, huh.

BARBARA: They're gonna see. I know Judy'll be down here "borrowing some flour," and just happen to remember- and then they'll all be talking.

JEFF: That woman would comment if one of the tulips dropped a petal. Anyway, I would've thought Linda's the only one to worry about.

BARBARA: Nah, Linda's alright, it's Jews she doesn't like. I just don't want to be first, you know?

JEFF: Well, so what if you're the first? Eh? We were the first to paint the fence duck egg blue. And then, yeah, there were some comments, but what do you know? Now everyone's doing it, the whole damn street! The neighbourhood is known for it! Down Surbiton street, you know what they say, they say- 'hey, aren't you from Madison Grove, where they paint the fences blue?' And then they go off on one telling me how neat they are, and how they wished their street had them too- Hey, maybe it's the same here. If you give, then I'm sure Mr King himself would be proud. And if you don't, well, you haven't done anything wrong. Where they're from, I'm sure they're just happy they're not getting strung up. *(He exits, passing MARY, seven, who enters)*

BARBARA: Hey, Mary!

MARY: Hi.

BARBARA: Were you playing with the little girl next door?

MARY: Yeah.

BARBARA: Do you like her? What did you talk about?

MARY: TV and stuff. I asked her if her Daddy's daddy was a slave (*Barbara looks aghast*) and if that meant she was a slave, and she said no, her daddy was a doctor and her grandfather worked on a farm. May I have a glass of milk?

BARBARA: Oh- yes. (*She pours her one*)

MARY: She has her hair braided in lots of little bands at the back. Can I have my hair like that?

BARBARA: I'll see what I can do. (*She hands over the milk. Mary goes to leave*) You talk to her Mom or Dad?

MARY: Yeah, her Mom. She's real nice. I think you should let her in though, she's been standing outside the door for awhile.

BARBARA: What?! Christ!

(*She exits. Thirty seconds pass, muffled talking. Enter Barbara and EDNA MILTON, dressed similarly to Barbara. The tension is thick*)

EDNA: (*Faint Southern accent*) I'm sorry, I didn't mean to impose...

BARBARA: (*Shrilly*) No, no, it's fine, it's- better inside...

EDNA: I just wanted to apologise for my little girl being on your lawn. I told her not to go walking round other people's houses.

BARBARA: No, don't be silly, it's perfectly fine. Round here all the children play together.

EDNA: I'm glad to hear it.

(*pause. Inspiration strikes. Barbara thrusts the cake forward*)

BARBARA: I baked you a cake!

EDNA: Oh!

BARBARA: It's a bit of a tradition, everyone baking something when someone new's in the neighbourhood. You'll probably be getting lots more... why, any time now.

EDNA: It looks delicious! Thank you so much.

BARBARA: Oh, it was nothing.

(pause)

EDNA: I can't help noticing your Sunbeam mixer, it's just lovely. Do you bake a lot?

BARBARA: Yes. You know, when I bought it, I... I thought the pink would help set off the walls. I don't know if it worked.

EDNA: It does, it does.

(Another awkward pause)

BARBARA: Mary told me your husband's a doctor.

EDNA: He is, yes, his practice is in town.

BARBARA: Is he.....

EDNA: He's black as well, yes.

BARBARA: Right.

(This sudden acknowledgment is shattering. Edna speaks almost kindly)

EDNA: And what does yours do?

BARBARA: He works for Goldman Sachs. Working his way up the corporate ladder, although I wouldn't mind if he picked up the pace a bit...

EDNA: *(Laughs)* I know just how you feel. I spoke to your Mary briefly- she's a really nice girl. Got your eyes.

BARBARA: Thank you, people do say so. What's yours' name?

EDNA: Evelyn.

BARBARA: *(genuine)* That's a lovely name.

EDNA: Thanks, I know. I got a little boy too, Charles.

BARBARA: Oh! My son's called Charles too.

EDNA: Look at that!

BARBARA: What a coincidence! I suppose I'll see them around the school. I teach.

EDNA: You're an educator? That's very impressive, keeping the house looking so good with a job like that.

BARBARA: Well, it does wear me down sometimes, but it's the modern way... *(pause)* You might have seen my son around, he- he wears glasses.

EDNA: I believe I have.

BARBARA: He always gets jokes, you know, our surname's Holly- that makes him Buddy Holly. You probably saw him and thought it too.

EDNA: I didn't like to say.

BARBARA: He pulls it off though, I like to think anyway. He even says he wants to see him in concert, although I've told him to wait till he's older...

EDNA: Plenty of time for that.

BARBARA: Yes- and that's thing *(her speech is speeding up alarmingly)* That's the thing when a kid looks different, you see, when a kid's different like that- they're got to learn to pull it off, you know, they've got to make it part of their character, otherwise there's no hope at all- to make it work, to make it, to... to survive... because kids can be cruel, you know, and I would know, I teach them, kids can be damn, cruel, and to pull that sort of thing off, well, a kid's got to have character, character and a whole lot of nerve. A whole lot of nerve.

(Silence)

BARBARA: *(breathing very quick)* You.... You come from Alabama, don't you?

EDNA: We do.

BARBARA: You know this is... this isn't how things are generally done here. Not in Pittsburgh, not in Madison Grove. You must know

that, surely. I mean, look around you. Not a bad thing, not necessarily, but right now- here...

(Silence)

EDNA: *(With immense weight)* It's been... so hard...

(Pause. She suddenly smiles)

EDNA: Thank you for the cake. *(She turns to go)*

BARBARA: Mrs Milton- Edna-

(Edna stops and turns, suddenly quite on guard)

BARBARA: Can you show me how to plait Mary's hair like you plait Evelyn's?

(Long pause. Edna half laughs)

EDNA: I've never plaited a white girl's hair before. *(Pause)* I'm sure you can teach me. *(She turns to go)*

BARBARA: Edna...

EDNA: Yes?

BARBARA: *(slowly)* You are welcome here.

EDNA: *(a beat)* Thank you. *(She exits. Blackout. End.)*

LEONARD BELDERSON
Jane Austen College, Norwich

*Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize
11 to 15 age-group*

Background note

I was inspired to write this short story after attending a YWSP Imagining History workshop at Holkham Hall.

I have chosen to set my story in 11th Century Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire (although the populace proudly called it Roman). This is a fascinating city, now known as Istanbul, which I would one day love to visit.

The story itself is imagined, but descriptions of the city, the palace rooms and the contextual events, such as the Battle of Manzikert or the invasion of Rûm, are all based on historical records from that time.

THE CITY OF WORLD'S DESIRE

Leonard Belderson

Alexios Komnenos barged his way through the lavish palace corridors, pushing aside distinguished and illustrious patrician alike. Anyone who dared yield a complaint in his direction was met by a hurriedly produced piece of purple parchment and a few harsh words. He was tailed by his eunuch Elias, a feeble stick insect of a man, with fibrous, greying hair and pale skin from a lifetime of office enclosure. With Elias scurrying behind, Alexios continued his relentless assault on the dignity of the aristocrats, carrying himself as if they were the inconveniences, his eyes connecting with no-one. But many a jealous eye was loaned upon him. For Alexios was parading against the flow of Christians hurrying to the Hagia Sophia for evening service and all he met had little doubt of what that ordained. He was going deeper into the sacred palace complex, heading straight for the emperor's throne room.

The raucous rabble of nobles and bureaucrats started to thin as the bodyguards thickened. Elite and devoted, these were huge men of barbarian stock who wore their beards long and their axes longer. Any proud foreign delegate could not help being awed by these monstrous, exotic creatures - the emperor was not just guaranteed by God, he was protected by demons. Alexios, unlike Elias who lowered his head and trembled whenever in their presence, had long become accustomed to the men he knew as Varangians. So he kept his chin up and stature noble.

After passing several diplomatic missions, the two men arrived at the Varangian unit awaiting them. The captain of the guard stepped forward. "Ah Alexios! What news have you from the Sultan?" He spoke in barbaric Greek which irritated Alexios' ears like sand in his eyes.

"You know that is between me and the emperor. However, I can tell you I bear a peace offering of some significance..." Alexios added emphasis on this last part. "Now, if you would be so kind, this is a

matter of urgency.”

“Of course,” replied the captain. A tremendous groan was heard as the heavy, bejewelled oak doors were forced open and Alexios and Elias entered a truly royal chamber. A row of immense, rare-mineral colonnades that alternated between porphyry, quartz and green Thessalian marble supported exquisitely decorated arches. All the emperors long ascended were depicted in mosaics that filled the wake of the arches, solemnly watching the visitors’ arrival.

Walking behind his master, Elias gazed up at the stern portraits. Though only a slave, he liked to imagine something of himself in their eyes. The whole hall was illuminated in imperial purple by stained-glass windows, depicting saints and angels, and above these a domed ceiling seemed to reach into the heavens. The rift between the divine and the worldly was blurred in this room housing the vice-regent to God himself.

The advancing steps of Alexios and Elias on the polished marble floor resonated to the corners of the vast space and back again. They proceeded down an avenue of gold and silver trees bearing ruby, sapphire and emerald for fruit, and providing a roost for delicate, golden clockwork birds, whose wings flapped and who peeked at those below through round, diamond eyes. A delightful smell of frankincense emanated from hundreds of warmly glowing, gold censers suspended on golden chains from the immeasurable heights above. Ahead, upon a tiered podium, surrounded by mechanical lions whose mouths opened and closed so as they appeared to growl, was the noble seat itself.

And on that Holy chair slumped a tired old man. Emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates was a grey-bearded fellow who had spent his waning years greeting guests, raising taxes, commanding generals, passing laws and ordering autocrats about with all that was left of his heart.

“Rise, most loyal of my subjects.”

This simple utterance was an obvious chore for the old man’s lungs, its pitiful sound only amplified by the echoes of the grand room. Alexios was overcome with unmitigated disgust. This was simply not a condition to be tolerated in an emperor who was meant to be chosen by the Lord.

“You may speak Alexios, what my friend?”

“My most illustrious and righteous lord, divine defender of the faith and vice-regent to God,” he honoured, loudly, aware of the Emperor’s encroaching deafness. “The Sultan sues for peace.”

“This is excellent!” cried Nikephoros. “What are the terms?”

“We must cede Nicaea, Prussa and their surrounding Themes. We must concede 1000 pounds of gold and pay an annual tribute of 50 pounds for peace.” Alexios’ eyes watered as he repeated the humiliating concessions the Sultan of Rûm had stated to him in his silk tent. Yet the emperor’s reaction was very different.

“Agree at once! I will have the payment ready in five days to be sent along with my acceptance.”

“But sir!” the imperial messenger protested.

“Alexios.” Nikephoros silenced him. “In 60 years you too will realise gold is a small price to preserve Roman lives.” He paused, gazing at his messenger. “You have served me well Alexios, you’re not like the scheming courtiers and councilors. You are loyal to nothing but me and the Empire. Unlike that rat Isaac, I can trust you.”

Alexios’s eyes lit up. Isaac Komnenos was a relative and heir apparent to the throne. Like the Emperor, Isaac thought he could trust Alexios. After all, he had sent Alexios to kill Nikephoros.

The old emperor looked thoughtfully at Alexios. “Follow me,” he commanded. He slowly rose from the throne and two slaves rushed to help. They acted as walking sticks as he descended the stairs at the back of the throne room and entered a passageway. Alexios and Elias followed him to the imperial bedchamber. After helping him onto the silken bed, Nikephoros addressed the slaves. “Leave us.” They bowed and exited. Then the emperor turned to Alexios. “Look out from that balcony.” Alexios did as commanded and gazed at Constantinople.

The great shimmering golden dome of the world’s largest cathedral, grand Hagia Sophia, matched the evening sea and sky of Thracia, standing proud as a testimony to the once endless power and wealth of the empire. Yet, as impressive as its vast marble arches were, the city in which it chose to ring its bells contained so many wonders that the Hagia Sophia seemed insignificant in comparison. The great Baths of

Zeuxippus. The Forum of Constantine. The mile-long Hippodrome. The Library of Earthly Wisdom and the Imperial Harbour. This truly was the Queen of Cities, The Great City, City of Constantine – The City of World’s Desire.

Then Nikephoros spoke. “We have created heaven on earth, paradise. Living here, in Constantinople, it’s hard to comprehend that we don’t own the world. With our elaborate rituals and marble and wealth, the exterior is certainly gold leaf. Yet under the surface it is rotten. The decay that started with Justinian has spread and manifested in every corner of this empire. Only at Manzikert did the sickness surface, but still we continue to ignore it! With our bath houses, palaces and cathedrals here, what do events hundreds of miles away matter? Look out at the harbour. Do you see the fleet that once ruled the waves, which once carried Belisarius to triumph? No. It has been sunk not by an enemy wielding weapons of iron, but by our own corruption and neglect. Even as we speak, the Turks raid the lands you see over the strait. Imperial property for 1000 years! But what do we care? We have our walls and our gold. We are Greeks pretending to be Romans in a world that no longer cares for either.”

Alexios was taken aback by this. He looked at the lands over the narrow sea channel. Smoke was rising from amidst the woods. His eyes wandered back to the cityscape and the avenues of grandiose villas, among them the home of Isaac. “Ah, my mission...” he recalled.

“Believe me, Alexios, if I weren’t so senile and unpopular I would have defeated the Sultan long ago, but you...you’re young, skilled and devoted to the Empire. You could do what so many have neglected to try.” The emperor was gasping, all this talking took the air from his lungs. “There’s a book, in that top drawer. Fetch it.”

Elias, with some trouble, opened the drawer in question. Alexios struggled to remove its contents. The huge book seemed to be made entirely of gold.

“Turn to the last page,” instructed the emperor from his bed.

Alexios placed the book on a writing table and turned to the last page. With a surge of emotion, he read, “It is my will that upon my death ----- will righteously ascend to the throne of the Romans.”

“Alexios Komnenos. You shall be emperor when death gets round to me.” Nikephoros smiled as he said this.

Alexios was too stunned to know how to react. He did manage a “Thank you, sire” and made to hand him the book.

“No! The years have been cruel to me.” The emperor held out a violently shaking hand. Alexios then handed the book and the imperial quill to Elias, who knew the art of replicating handwriting.

Alexios’ mind cleared as Elias put pen to paper. “What of my sacred oath, sworn over the gospels... to never leave the palace until the emperor is dead?” he remembered. To break such an oath would result in everlasting torment in hell.

The emperor had removed his crown, shoes and purple cloak ready for servants to do the rest before he retired to his bed.

“I think we can still keep it...” And with that thought, Alexios leapt upon Nikephoros and wrapped his cape tightly around the old man’s head. The extremity of his years didn’t stop Nikephoros from resisting. He struggled, grasping at the purple cloth and attempting to scream through its confines. The assassin took pleasure in watching these final moments of his master’s life. Alexios had inherited a cruel heart from his long dead soul and now an empire from his actions.

Elias did not question his master’s will. In silence, as if absorbed in thoughts of his own, he stamped the page with the imperial seal, returned the book to the drawer, then fetched the imperial night garments. Together, Alexios and Elias clothed the emperor and laid the body beneath his bedsheets. The pair then proceeded to the door as if they had done an old friend a favour. Outside, the two slaves and two Varangians were waiting expectantly. “The Emperor retired early tonight,” Alexios said. “He was feeling very poorly. Pray he survives the night.”

The next day it was announced in the Hippodrome to a crowd of 200,000 that Nikephoros was now with God. He had died peacefully in his sleep of natural causes. Alexios hadn’t slept all night. His blood was still boiling with anticipation as he and Elias made their way into the imperial box of the Hippodrome. He could see a gleaming Isaac who grinned and nodded at him from within the crowd. The imperial announcer was holding the golden book, unopened since last night.

With a grand gesture he silenced the crowd. All present expected the book to contain the name Isaac Komnenos, all except Alexios and Elias. The announcer then turned to the last page and began to read.

“It is my will...”

Alexios couldn't hold back the excitement. He started manically twitching and sweating. His mouth was open and drooling. “That fool Isaac! My first command will be his execution!”

The announcer continued. “That the person who shall righteously ascend to the throne of the Romans upon my death is...” He hesitated, looking utterly bewildered. A universal gasp and expectant whispers arose from the crowd.

Isaac turned to Alexios, confused at Alexios' mad eyes.

The announcer anxiously peered down at the writhing mob below him. He gulped, struggling to believe his eyes before eventually he brought the words forward “...is Elias Diogenes. All hail Emperor Elias!”

MAISIE BECKETT
Gwent, South Wales

*Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize
16 to 19 age-group*

THE HIDDEN ENEMY

Maisie Beckett

The velvet black sky was littered with snowflakes fluttering to the ground like a thousand sly fairies and the plush blanket of white coated the evergreen trees that wound through the park. With tremulous fingers the man pulled the bandage closer to his mouth and bent his head to obscure his face. A shiver wriggled down his spine, but it was not the freezing weather that shook him. The glasses he wore had not been fashioned for his sunken eyes, nor was the itchy wig made for his head. He scratched his nose as he spotted two soldiers approaching and cast his eyes to the floor. Neither man acknowledged him and continued along the path absorbed in conversation. The man breathed a shuddering sigh of relief, he had passed a few other soldiers on his journey, eyeing him under their tall fur hats. He could imagine what they thought of him, most likely a drunk or a beggar. He smirked to himself, thinking if only they knew the truth, no man would slide past him without a word then. But of course this was what he wanted, to remain hidden, invisible, until he reached the Smolny Institute of Petrograd.

A couple strolled past him and glancing sideways at their closeness, an icy chill crept through his veins. He had spent so much time alone in his life, all from his lonely excursions as a child through to his exile in Finland. But he had never felt truly alone until tonight. There had always been a family to return home to at the end of the day or even distant comrades, oceans away, but still close in ideals and objectives. He supposed he had the latter now, although if he were caught tonight they would not be capable of helping him and it would spell the end of everything they had worked for. In the end though, there had been no other choice but to leave that infernal room, even though Trotsky had implored him to remain hidden. He had been itching with a feverous impatience, hearing the voice on the end of the line speak of the city slowly falling to the hands of the red guards and men filled with the same fervour as he. How could his men ask him to hide away on the eve of his great revolution?

He did not miss their sneers and mischievous glares when they thought he wasn't looking. He could see through the bright lightness in their eyes, the cold and irrevocable ambition creeping through like a cat waiting to pounce. He'd be damned if he let any of those foolish up-starts steal even an ounce of his glory on this night, or any other. Even if it meant risking his life in the evasion of the countless government troops who were scouring the city in search of him.

In the distant darkness there was a snarl and soon a howl followed it. The path curved to the right and as he turned it the shimmering streetlights displayed as if on a stage, the ghastly tableaux of two soldiers pulling along a great German Shepard. The beast curled its lip and sniffed along the concrete path. The man sucked in a breath and stalled in his tracks. Something about the men struck him as significantly different to all of the other troops he had encountered. They had all been stiff in posture and stern in voice, but involved themselves in little else but their partner or own immediate thoughts. He had laughed internally upon passing each of them. Their flippancy proving further how this once great country had run itself into the muck.

The dog's narrowed eyes snapped up to his as they advanced. The man staggered forward, hoping to appear inconspicuous, but apparently failing.

"You there, stop where you are," called the tallest of the guards. Both were lean and decorated with the signature uniform and fur hat of the Russian troops.

He stopped, once again, as told and pulled his hands from his pockets. The guards approached him as their dog continued to elicit menacing snarls and grunts in his direction. They eyed him suspiciously, neither yet speaking a word. He would never admit it, but inside his woollen pockets his hands began to tremble.

The same man who spoke before rubbed his bearded chin with his thumb. "What are you doing out so late?" The beast barked continually and the smaller guard hauled him back.

"And what's that around your face?" He reached forward, as if to tug at the bandage.

The man flinched away pulling the material tighter, his eyes frantic. “From the war,” he mumbled.

But the guard peered at him with furrowed brows. His words must have been muffled by the material or lost in the biting winds.

“The war,” he said again.

The guard nodded. “It’s dangerous for you to be out this late, old man. Haven’t you heard the Bolsheviks are trying to storm the Winter Palace?”

The shorter guard beside him laughed. “The key word there is ‘trying’.” The hound barked again.

“They’re not likely to succeed,” he agreed. “They don’t even have their damned leader with them.”

The man nodded and choked out a laugh.

“Best you get yourself inside tonight,” smirked the tall guard. “The city isn’t safe for the beggarly sort.” And with that the men brushed past him and on into the night.

A wave of heaviness rippled off his bones as he exhaled an icy breath. His heart had felt like a frozen stone behind his ribs but now it pounded rapidly against them. With a start he hurried away and soon emerged from the path and onto the street.

Each street flew past him in a blur of brown brick and shivering silver flakes. Men and women rushed around and shouts could be heard both close and distant. He ducked his head down and thought of all the blight and rage spreading through the city at this very moment. Of course he couldn’t be credited for the anger of the Russian citizens. They had been abused, starved and left to suffer by the government and crown for decades. But for this night and the ones to follow, he could take credit. Both fear and pride gripped his throat with a clawed hand at the thought.

Soon enough the tall white pillars of the Smolny Institute rose up before him, like ancient guardian angels peering down at him in judgement. He gulped and rubbed his palms together, warming them. Ascending the steps, he caught sight of a red guard putting out a cigarette by the door. He approached the man and gasped, “Room 36.”

“What did you say?” The man raised his chin.

“I said...” He tugged the cloth from his face and let it fall to the ground. “Take me to room 36.”

The guard, upon seeing him gazed wondrously. “Yes... Right away sir.” He charged through the door and up the main staircase. The man followed close behind him, discarding the hat and glasses.

Then in a blink of an eye, they stood opposite the room. Without a word the man stepped into the curling cigarette smoke and loud jeers. The room was abuzz with life. Men rushed back and forth. Pulling at telephones, shouting into the receivers, reading from large papers and pencilling down information. “They’ve got it,” one man shouted. “Almost at the gates, sir,” called another. Men lay on the floor, some dozing peacefully amongst the chaos, others laughing to themselves and chugging on bottles of vodka, others sat at tables playing cards.

The room was like a madhouse. But nowhere could he see worry or frustration on a man’s face. Each was filled with hope and creeping fulfilment. Each sure of himself and his cause. Each certain of a future free of the Romanovs and their God-forsaken government.

“Sir! Mr. Lenin!”

His head whipped to the left and he caught sight of one of his young comrades. The man stood proud and grinning, his bushy moustache curling at the ends.

“Stalin, what have I missed?”

DARCIE IZATT
Stenhousemuir, Larbert

*Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize
16 to 19 age-group*

THE LAST LEAF

Darcie Izatt

The autumn before the famous winter of 1940 was a particularly memorable one, not least because school was no longer on my calendar. The humid summer days when the soil had been baked dry were just a distant memory, and the first hints of the Artist's fiery palette were seeping through the landscape, filtering burnt orange and rusty copper onto the green leaves of all the trees. The faithful old sycamore rooted beside our cottage turned a golden-lime, soaking in the weakening sunlight that penetrated the foggy clouds; huge swathes of moisture that crept up from the sea to our little village on the hill. Watching the first leaf fall onto the slowly yellowing grass, I hoped that this would be the last autumn before all the men came home: fathers and brothers to fill the empty chairs at the dinner table. But it didn't look as if the war was nearing an end at all so I simply hoped that the colours of the trees in Germany were just as spectacular.

It was an age of change. Two evacuees from Glasgow came to stay with us in the country, little sisters both almost exactly the same in looks and personality yet two years apart: Rose and Edith. They stuck to their surrogate mother like glue and I found it funny to hear their loveable voices wailing for "Auntie Moore!" I don't think Mother minded them too much, in fact I think she rather liked having two adorable girls to fuss over and dress. I liked them too. Never having had a sister before and now having practically two was interesting to say the least. If they weren't babbling on about the most bizarre things, there was something wrong, and they quite filled the empty space my father and brother had left behind. Well, not quite. Nothing could fully hide the absence of a man in the household, especially when the roof was needing fixed and we had buckets all over the kitchen, or the crops needed harvesting and I sweltered all day in the field, cutting the golden sheaves into regularly-spaced little stocks.

Doris and I had left school earlier in the year, a fact that was harder to accept than I thought it would be. We emerged into a dreary, dangerous

and uncertain world, where any career training had to be put on hold indefinitely. I had always wanted to study languages but the war had messed up my hopes of going to university, so in the meantime I cycled all over the country delivering telegrams for a spot of cash. Mr Hughes, the post-office owner, was a beefy man with an enormous moustache that he kept in faultless condition, waxed and curled up in the corners to perfection. His small keen eyes blinked with such startling rapidity that when I first started, Doris had whispered that he looked like a seal and ever since then, I could never look at him with a straight face, imagining him with flippers. I spent three years there with Mr Hughes, running up and down the country on my second-hand bike, delivering notes of death and life. Yet in my indifference, I thought that nothing could ever touch my small insignificant village that wasn't even on a single map.

One morning I was asked to take a letter to the Richards, who lived several miles from the village out near where the best fruit bushes were, and on reflection, it was one of the best deliveries I ever made. Only old Mrs Richards was at home and she called me in for a hot drink while she read the letter. I perched nervously on her old stool, sipping the weak tea. The deep furrows carved into her wrinkled face slowly creased into a smile when she turned to me, the close stranger, and said her son was coming home, excused from service. As she enveloped me in her arms, her musty aroma filling my nostrils, I admitted to myself that this was really what my job was about. I stayed talking to her for a good half hour, the sun rising ever higher in the sky to sparkle through the little frosted windows of her thatched cottage. Returning to work on the lonely road, where the hedgerows were bursting with indigo berries, I felt a great sense of satisfaction and stopped to pick some of the sweet fruit which was soon to be made into jam for the coming winter.

So, in this way, the seasons drew on. The first delicate trace of frost covered the landscape, minute specks of petrified dust on every single plant and spider's web. Rose and Edith were delighted; they rolled and stamped around the garden in my wellies calling out "Snow!" every two seconds. I tried to explain to them that this wasn't snow, only frost, and the snow would come later and be much thicker, but they grew so insistent that I gave up. Mum smiled from the doorway, her forehead creased with wrinkles. "The dears, they don't get to do this in

the city.” Unlike the other evacuees in the village, their mother wrote regularly, her large cursive writing singing words of encouragement and love to her little sweethearts, and it made my own heart swell to receive her lovely letters. We read them aloud to the girls in the living room every month, sucking one sweet each from the slowly shrinking stock that we had bought before the war. I would help Mother write a reply, with the girls’ input, about how happy they were. Which was true. Years later, they moved back into the neighbourhood, claiming that their early experience of rural life here had captivated them. I still see them once in a while. We were all as happy as we could be. But then the casualties began.

The baker’s son was the first to go, mowed down in a muddy field with two legs missing. Mrs Calder’s husband was next, leaving three young children behind, wretched. It shattered all my hopes, breaking that thin layer inside of me that was keeping me going, and my worries began to take root. I could see it in Mother’s face when I came home with the newspapers every day. I could see it in the faces of everyone I handed telegrams or mail to. I could see it in my own face when I had to deliver a telegram with ‘priority’ written on the top and a special mark on the outside, which told me not to bother waiting for a reply because there was no-one left to reply to. Those abhorrent telegrams! I never want to see another one of them again.

I will forever remember the morning that I realised I had lost my faith in humanity. I went in to start the day at work and there was Mr Hughes, looking gravely over the countertop at me. He handed over one of the ‘bad news’ telegrams. I looked at the name on the envelope slowly: Mrs H. Davies, Doris’s mother. I raised my eyes to meet Mr Hughes’ own pained ones and this time did not laugh. He wiped his eyes with his chequered handkerchief. “I’m sorry I need to ask you to do this. But give the family my condolences, will you?” He reached over the counter to put his hand on my shoulder for a long minute, then turned away slowly in silence. I stood with the poisoned telegram in my hand; struck dumb, sorrowfully going through names in my head. Alfred, James, Mr Davies himself. Whose name was written inside? It was terrible to hope that one was dead and the other not, so I stopped thinking about it and went to get my bike. Oh, how did I ever deliver the news?

I cycled the short road to Doris’s house as slowly as the wheels

would allow. The sun had almost fully risen over the valley, a scarlet light burning a hole in the sky. I drew up at the pretty Georgian farmhouse with white-painted walls and a blue door, and stared. "Do it," I said to myself, but my feet didn't want to move. Maybe I could just stay here forever, or turn back, come another day?

I fixed my belt gingerly and stepped gently up to the door, quivering, and knocked. Doris answered with a smile. "Susan! How are you?" Her smile stabbed my heart, and I wished for all the money in the world I would never have to do this again.

"Mr Hughes says you don't need to come to work today," I said, stuttering. Then from a pouch in my coat I took the fateful telegram. "He...um...sends his...condolences." I held the telegram in the air ominously but Doris didn't take it.

"Oh!" she exclaimed quietly, her face contorting into a strange sort of yellow. "Susan!" She spluttered, her eyes beginning to drowse her cheeks. "Take it away!"

I could only hold the telegram out helplessly. At that moment, Mrs Davies came through, apron on, duster in her hand. She looked at me knowingly and took the telegram without a word. With her deft fingers, she opened it. A nervous second stretched on and I uncomfortably lowered my hand. I could just make out the black words glaring up from the yellow paper.

"It's James, my dear," she finally whispered, chokingly, stepping up to embrace Doris. "He's gone to God."

That was it then, I thought, consoling the grieving pair, my own eyes watering. James, the more daring of the two brothers, was gone. I had memories of him playing pranks on Doris and I when we were younger, joining us on our many adventures in the hills, all the while flicking that floppy black hair out of his eyes. He had grown more serious later, just before he had gone off to fight, but still he had always been the brother that knew just what a sister and her best friend needed. It took me a long time to return home that morning to relay the news to Mother because when I got there, I could only stand in the cold with an aching heart, knowing that life would never be the same again. It was then that I noticed that the last leaf on the sycamore, which had been holding its own for days now, was falling to the ground, swaying

back and forth ever so peacefully until it finally came to rest. I took out the other letter from my back pocket that I had to deliver, the one with very familiar handwriting, the one for me, and I ran into the house. Autumn was over...

HAARIS LUQMAN
Glasgow Academy, Glasgow

*Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize
11 to 15 age-group*

THE VERY THOUGHT OF YOU

Haaris Luqman

Corruption. The word is ancient, the practice older still. It conjures up images of Eve, seduced by the serpent, leading to the fall of man. No one wants to be corrupt. Every man thinks of himself as incorruptible. I always did. But there are many who would call me corrupt today. And they would be right. As I look around my little flat, no longer squalid, freshly painted, and echoing to the sound of my wife's laughter, I tell myself, 'Yes. You made the right choice.'

I stood looking out over the Clyde. In the cold November evening where it all began. The river flowed impassively under the Fishergate Bridge, unconscious of the great war that was tearing Europe apart. My tin helmet carried the night's chill, permeating my thinning hair. I loosened the chin straps and turned away, intent on continuing my patrol.

The bombing south of the river had been heavy but none was expected that night. Around me the buildings of childhood glowered down, skeletal now, their broken and blackened ribs jutting into the darkening sky. On the partial wall of one building a poster was affixed. I smiled at it. AIR RAID WARDENS WANTED, AND THEY ARE WANTED NOW! was emblazoned around an illustration of a heroic, strong-chinned man in the same uniform as me. He looked like Laurence Olivier. But the war was not what we saw in the picture houses.

As I passed from street to street in the gloomy Gorbals, the blitz spirit encouraged by the poster was given the lie. Dark shapes shifted in the failing light. Men and women huddled in doorways, none making eye contact, each suspicious and unfriendly. I spied the occasional white shirt-tail or glove – as per regulations, citizens were allowed to wear flashes of white to keep visible to traffic. It was an odd contrast – black against white. A man in a flat cap barged into me.

'Watch where ye're gawn, mate,' he hissed.

Instinctively, I checked my pockets. I hadn't been robbed. Not that I had much worth pilfering. Before I could rebuke him he had melted into the darkness.

I had almost decided to call it a night – the streets were starting to unnerve me – when suddenly I heard a discreet cough from the shadows. I paused, irresolute, uncertain of what I'd heard. Detaching himself from a doorway, a man stepped into my path.

'Good evening, Mr Smith?'

'Aye,' I said.

'A pleasure, sir.'

'Do I know you?'

'Not yet. But I know you.' The stranger was tall, wearing an expensive grey coat and a fedora. Above his lip he sported an Errol Flynn moustache. 'You're an ARP warden, are you no?'

'I am.'

'And so you have the run of the night?'

'What do you mean?'

'You pass without comment, in the night, my friend. You have access to every street, every building, if you have the need?'

'I have my duties,' I said, confusion in my voice. 'Listen, what is this? If you are up to no good, I'll have you taken in.'

I fancied I had the measure of the fellow. A spiv. The streets were over-run with them: black marketeers, thieves, those out to make what they could from people's suffering. No good man trafficked with them. Upright chaps stood together, embracing adversity with stoic fortitude.

'Oh, it's like that? Still one of the war heroes. We're all heroes to the mouths we feed. Well, I'll bid you adieu. For now.'

The man dipped his hat, but as he passed me I felt my arm gripped, and then my hand. Through my mind ran the old lessons of self-defence – grab, push, fight back. Instead I stood rooted to the spot, expecting the sudden sharpness of a punch to the gut, or a knife in

the ribs. Instead my hand was briefly grasped, and then released and, in a flash, my would-be friend was gone. From my clasped hand, something white fluttered and fell to the ground. I stooped to retrieve it. A note. Squinting hard, I managed to make out the address of the old warehouse nearby. I thrust it into my pocket, with dim thoughts about having the fool locked up, before turning for home.

My lodgings were modest, a collapsing tenement that predated the Great War. My wife and I had two rooms, sparsely furnished. Flaking wallpaper peeled from the walls, like dead skin. I turned to the sound of a weak cough.

‘Are you well, Maggie?’

She lay on our low cot and tried to rise at the sound of my voice. She fell back.

‘You’re still not well. Has the doctor come?’

‘I’m feeling better today, Jonah. Much better.’

A racking cough assured me she was lying, breaking the lilt of her voice. She was always one to put a brave face on it.

‘The doctor won’t come, but it’s really no matter.’

I sighed. Doctor McRae, the only reputable physician still working in the Gorbals, had resisted my requests for some weeks. Maggie had asked and asked but the good doctor, a staunch and strict Presbyterian, would have nothing to do with my unashamedly Irish Catholic wife. That seemed to me – it still seems to me – corruption of a kind. The good order I had always believed in, the good order it was my job to maintain...

I took off my coat and hung it up on a peg behind the door. I made light conversation with Maggie, punctuated by her coughs and splutters. It had reached her lungs. I didn’t say it, but I knew that I would have to find more money to convince Dr McRae to visit, or to find another doctor willing to travel from further outside the district. My eyes wandered around the old room. There was no money here. They fell upon my tattered old coat, and the image of the note swam into my mind. There was money and advancement to be had in bringing in the criminals who got rich off the war. Only recently I had read about a fellow who had reached the rank of Chief Warden,

and the coveted two-striped white helmet, after foiling a small ring in the East End. He had unearthed a warehouse of perfume, petrol and canned food, and saw the rewards.

‘Maggie, darling, I must go out again. Something big going on – work, you see. Will you be alright?’

‘Of course I will, Jonah. Don’t be long, will you? Be safe.’

She held out her hand and I patted it before folding it over her chest and straightening the thin bedclothes. I left the battered old radio – our prized possession – warbling out Al Bowlly’s *The Very Thought of You*, put my coat and helmet back on and stepped back into the night.

Even in the blackout, I had little trouble finding the warehouse – an old place used for storing salt in better days, out past our parish church, the Blessed John Duns Scotus. It was an enormous box of a building, its broken windows shuttered and blank. Finding a little alley that seemed to pass through it, I reached a deserted courtyard in the building’s centre. I turned on the spot, gazing up at the bare walls around me. From somewhere I heard low growls, and felt the hair on the back of my hands rise.

Several inky shapes resolved themselves into attack dogs, the gleam of their white fangs flashing in the moonlight. I began to back away as they circled me, holding my breath against the wild animal smell, the musk and reek of them. In one swift movement I turned and threw myself back in the direction from which I’d come, my coat flapping out behind me, my mind clear of all thoughts except to get away. I should have known the scoundrels would have taken measures to protect themselves – at my back I could sense the movement of the beasts, excited, sensing prey.

‘Easy lads!’

I recognised the voice of my erstwhile friend from earlier, as he yanked hard on choke chains and brought the attack dogs to heel.

‘So you came, my friend?’

‘I am here,’ I said, fighting the rising note of hysteria in my voice, ‘to bring your game to an end.’

‘Is that so?’

I could not see his face clearly but could tell that he was smiling.

‘Without seeing what it is we do here? Come, Mr Smith.’ He tied the leads of his dogs to a hook, and passed towards a door, pushing it open and holding it.

Without taking my eyes off him, I stepped into the low light. The room into which he led me resembled nothing so much as a neat and tidy office. It was the kind of place one could imagine the Cabinet meeting – it smelled of polished wood, paper and ink. The only odd note was the stack of crates which lined one wall. In the light I could better see my companion’s face. Triumphant I pointed to the boxes. ‘There!’ I said. ‘Contraband. Illegal goods! You’re a dirty spiv, a ... a pirate!’

Again he smiled that infuriating smile. ‘You’re no a rich man, are you, Mr Smith?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Your work, it doesn’t pay you well, does it? You’re no rewarded for helping the country in this war?’

I said nothing. I let my eyes wander around the room. They landed on some wooden crates with crosses painted on them. Medical supplies. I thought of Maggie.

‘I know all about you, sir. I do my homework. You need help and you won’t get it from honesty. There’s a doctor in the district who would help Russian Jews before a sick Catholic like your wife.’

‘What do you know of my wife? Who are you?’

‘Call me Grey, Mr Smith. And there are no secrets in the Gorbals. No any honesty or decency either. Not anymore. You know who my friends are? Your bosses. That doctor. Politicians and their wives. They’re doing alright. They’re not that shy of taking what they can to ease the hardness of the war.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ I said. But I did. The rumours of people living with their luxuries whilst the rest suffered were rife.

‘Don’t you? I think you do, Mr Smith. Why work your fingers to the bone, suffer chilled toes and walk streets full of criminals, only to return to a wife no one will help?’

‘I...’

‘Why do your bit for the war effort, when the country’s no doing its bit for you? We’re no thugs, Mr Smith. We’re Robin Hoods, easing suffering when the government would let us starve and fight like rats in sacks.’

‘But I am an honest man.’

‘Like Brutus?’ He smiled.

‘Like any good man who knows the law, and abides by it. Upholds it.’

‘Aye, a true hero. And when you lie in a pauper’s grave beside your poor wife, they can carve it on your tombstone. “Here lies a good man who knew the law”.’ His dark eyes held mine in a hypnotic, lulling gaze.

‘What do you want from me?’ My mind had fixed on the image of a gravestone in the Southern Necropolis. Maggie couldn’t survive long without help, and the good respected men of the district wouldn’t give it. I might linger on after her, pining away, satisfied that I had never broken the law, waving a Union Jack in an empty, bare tenement. Alone.

‘Only this. Turn a blind eye. Let us take what we need when there’s a raid, bring in what we need. Protect our trade, and take your cut. It won’t be a large cut. You won’t be doing anything worse than what the government is doing. Can a few boxes of medicine, some perfume and chocolate, help old Mr Hitler? I don’t think so. Think about your wife.’

I did. And I made my decision.

EMMA STRUTT
Faversham, Kent

*Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize
11 to 15 age-group*

THE FIRST BULLET

Emma Strutt

June 1914, Sarajevo

There was a man standing in a whitewashed room, leaning his head against the wall. He coughed, and blood dripped into the sink below him. His hand was clenched, in it a crumpled-up newspaper article.

His name was Gavrilo Princip and tomorrow he was going to kill a man.

He coughed again. For the last time, he told himself. Tuberculosis could not kill him today. With shaking hands, he unfolded the newspaper in his fist. *Archduke Franz Ferdinand's procession through Sarajevo*, the article proclaimed. His eyes narrowed.

Gavrilo wiped the blood from his lips with the newspaper. A red stain spread across the photograph of the Archduke's cold face.

His hands shook and he took a deep breath. Tomorrow he would become a martyr. For his people – for the Slavs.

“Princip.” It was Ilić, with something almost like excitement in his voice. “We are waiting.”

He splashed water on his face, before striding over to the door. It screeched at its hinges as he pushed it open, revealing the dimly lit backroom of the café. And there they all were, all crowded around a table, heads bent low, voices sharp and secretive. Čubrilović, Ilić, Čabrinović and the rest of them. Men that Gavrilo barely knew, but he had started to think of as brothers.

Were they men or boys? Martyrs or murderers? Gavrilo did not know. Perhaps they were a little bit of all those things. There was something that he did know, though, something that bound them together. It was a fierce nationalism running through their blood, a determination to save their people from the oppressors.

Ilić beckoned to him. He joined the little group around the table,

which was littered with weapons. One of the men handed him a gun. Its shape was heavy and familiar in his hand; it was the same model that he had used before when practising. Not everyone was given guns. They were given bombs as well, just to be sure.

They only gave Gavrilo a gun. He had, after all, always had the best shot.

The streets of Sarajevo were thick with people, all crowded together to catch a glimpse of the Archduke and his wife, Gavrilo Princip was among them. To them, he was just another man, here to watch.

The gun felt heavy in his pocket. Gavrilo tried to stop his fingers from curling over it. He doubted he would need to use it anyway. The Archduke's car would have to pass all the other men before it reached him. It probably wouldn't reach him at all. It would be a wreckage on the roadside, destroyed by one of the others' bombs. He was more of a safety catch, only to be put into action if something went drastically wrong.

A selfish little part of Gavrilo wished he would be the first in line for the Archduke's car to pass. He could be the one to pull the trigger. He could be the martyr. He could be the hero.

He pushed these thoughts away. It didn't matter who killed the Archduke. All that mattered was that he died. Then they would be one step further to freeing the Slavs from the constraints of Austria.

The sun basked the street in a golden glow. The stone of the buildings seemed to shine in the light, tall shadows flickering against them. It was a beautiful day, Gavrilo thought, for an event that would change history.

Anticipation built up inside him. Or maybe it was fear. He couldn't really tell. It took all his control to keep his face calm with the jumble of feelings at the pit of his stomach.

His hand went to his pocket – the lighter one, without the gun. He could feel the tiny object in there. The cyanide pill. The little pill that would be the death of him. They all had one. They had promised to take them, so they wouldn't be able to give each other up to the authorities. Gavrilo felt a little sick.

He didn't want to die. Not for the Slavs, nor for the men he thought of as brothers. But he would take the cyanide pill, because if he didn't tuberculosis would kill him anyway. If he was going to die, at least he would die knowing he had changed history. At least he would die by his own hand, not at the invisible hand of a cruel disease.

Gavrilo dropped his hand. He had to focus. He strained his ears, hoping to catch the sound of the distant blast of the bomb. He wondered if he would be able to hear it from there.

Then he heard it. Not the sound of the bomb or a gunshot. Instead, he heard strains of words from strangers. Whispers, voices, saying the words he had been waiting for.

"Ferdinand," he heard a young woman say, "I wonder if he's alright."

"A bomb," said another, "Someone threw it right at the car."

"Have you heard?" This voice was high pitched and panicked, "There was a bomb –"

For Gavrilo, all the words blurred into one. Someone must have thrown the bomb. The Archduke must be dead.

Gavrilo could have laughed, or cried, or fallen to his knees. All this careful planning, training, and waiting, all for this moment. The Archduke was dead. His dreams of Yugoslavia could become true.

He was so dazed by the realisation that someone had thrown the bomb he had stopped listening to what the people around him had been saying. He was deaf to their words and the relief in their voices.

"It's alright, he's unharmed," someone said.

"Thank God," muttered the man next to Gavrilo. "No one was killed."

Gavrilo didn't realise the Archduke had survived until it was too late. He heard the rumble of car wheels against the road. It wasn't until the car was right in front of him that he realised who was in it.

It was the Archduke, his face full of fury. For a moment Gavrilo thought it was a ghost. But no, it was Franz Ferdinand, completely unharmed.

His hand didn't even reach the gun. The car was already receding in to the distance, the Archduke still very much alive in it.

Gavrilo had never felt as bitter as he did then. He hadn't ever felt this sense of hopelessness before. Even the almost weightless cyanide pill felt as heavy as a brick.

Grabež had told him what happened. Čubrilović had thrown the bomb, but it had bounced off the shell of the car, injuring, but not killing anyone in the blast. No one else had acted, either out of fear or from the shock of seeing the Archduke alive.

Still shocked, Gavrilo had wandered over to a nearby food shop, where he still was. He leant against the wall, suddenly resenting the bright sun and its sticky heat. He ran his hand over the cyanide pill, wondering if he should take it anyway.

They had failed. There had been many of them, and they had still failed. He had failed. It should have been easy. The army hadn't been deployed that day, only the police. The car was open topped. The Archduke was an easy target.

In his mind he said a prayer for Čabrinović. He had been the only one to attempt the assassination. Even though he had failed, Gavrilo hoped he was still seen as a hero.

Then he heard it. The same rumble of wheels against the road that he had heard only less than an hour before. The sound of the car carrying the Archduke.

He looked up, languidly, unbelievably, sure his mind was playing tricks on him.

It wasn't a trick of the mind. The Archduke's car was reversing down the very street he was in.

It all happened very quickly. Gavrilo felt a surge of energy and before he even knew what he was doing the gun was in his hand. He pulled the trigger, not once but twice. It was so easy, just a twitch of his finger, and they were gone.

Sophie crumpled first, falling against her husband like a limp rag doll. Gavrilo hadn't meant to hit her, but in the rush his aim had been off. Blood stained her white dress, creeping across her abdomen in a crimson flower.

The Archduke didn't fall. He remained upright. Gavrilo thought he had missed for a moment. But then he saw the trickle of red from Ferdinand's neck.

He had done it. He had killed the Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

Gavrilo swallowed the cyanide pill with a strange sense of calm. Police and guards were rushing towards him now, people were shouting, and someone was screaming.

At the last moment he remembered something Grabež had told him. The cyanide pill, it hadn't killed Čabrinović. He raised the gun to his mouth.

Hands closed around him, around the gun, around his wrists, around his waist. In that moment, Gavrilo Princip didn't care.

He was a martyr for his people. He had killed the Archduke.

There was a man standing in a whitewashed cell, leaning his head against a wall. He coughed, and blood dripped onto the floor below him. His hand was clenched and his nails dug into his palms.

His name was Gavrilo Princip and last year he killed a man.

That man's name was Franz Ferdinand. The death of that man had sparked a war.

Gavrilo would not die in that war. He had a twenty-year prison sentence. He would die of tuberculosis, in the dark corner of a prison somewhere.

"You started a war," someone had said to him once, "Don't you care?"

Of course, he cared. Many people would die in that war. His people would die. He prayed for them every day. But maybe war would have come anyway, even if he hadn't pulled the trigger.

And maybe, out of that war there would arise something great. A Yugoslavia. His people, free from the bounds of Austria.

“Don’t you regret it?” another person had asked. “You started a war.”

Gavrilo Princip did not regret it. He knew something would arise from it. Something new and free. Something great.

Outside Princip’s cell, many miles away, a war raged. Millions of bullets were fired. Millions of people died.

Not a single one of these bullets shook the world quite like Princip’s bullet had.

VANEEZA BUTT
Egham, Surrey

Highly commended by the judges

THE FALSE PROPHET

Vaneeza Butt

I was uncomfortable, rehearsing what I was going to say repeatedly in my head until it became nonsensical. That was it. My moment to shine, however much a young journalist was allowed to, anyway.

It was 1964, and I was waiting for my interviewee in a fine, classy restaurant, with low-hanging yellow lamps and black leather booths, which I was awkwardly sitting at the end of, glancing casually at my watch. Hung above me were huge posters and banners, adorned with the words “**By any means possible**” in large, blocked letters. Standing grandly next to them was a framed picture of a tall black man with browline glasses and a shorter man in a stained apron. The two stood, arms around each other, laughing at something, a joke trapped behind glass and preserved forever, shared between only them, one of whom I was just about to interview.

I was in Boston, for an interview with America’s most talked about and controversy-attracting man of the time, Malcolm X. I was working for a large newspaper then, and my status as a rookie had expired soon after I conducted a report last August at Martin Luther King’s speech in Washington. I remember the surge of the crowd; hundreds of thousands gathered to listen to one man talk about his dream. “I have a dream,” he said to those who had all, and those who had none. My hand had almost twisted straight off trying to record every word he uttered, every syllable that quietened and taught even the haughtiest of whites in a smooth, lilting voice. Ever since I watched the reaction of those searching people, the glazed yet determined fire festering in their pupils, their voices, and definitely their souls. I felt moved to learn more, to educate myself. What Mr King said that day sure did teach me something; there is hope, and the place he called the “promised land”, although I would wholly remain unaffected by it, will stop the faultiness in American equality. But I’m still uncertain. Black activism had lead a long, arduous path so far, paved by what Mr King believed to be voice and expression, and what Mr X believed to be blood, sweat

and tears. To hear the differentiating opinions, I needed a second party, and I knew straightaway it had to be Malcolm X.

I worked tirelessly to get here, so I allowed myself to drum my fingers against my coffee cup to calm my worked-up nerves. I'm by myself, as requested by Mr X. When I first answered the phone call by his secretary, I was wildly underprepared, with different topics buzzing about inside, not making sense. However, the conversation was delightfully short and straightforward, not requiring over-inclusion of details. The voice that said, "Hello, you must be Jackson, lovely to meet you," was deep, with a twang of forcefulness. Not negatively however. I knew this man spoke this way for a deep-rooted reason, remembering Malcolm's unfortunate past, and how that had built him up. Often, I've noticed that the people with the most unique and deep-reaching voices have either trained themselves to speak this way, or, more commonly, gotten into the habit of speaking in a way they know will be heard. May it be angrily, passionately, or brooding and stoic, a word out the mouth of a powerful speaker will be listened to by whoever is around them, whatever they say.

Although the predominately white media (which I mostly read at the time) only illustrated Malcolm's "violence-promoting" activism, and the work he did alongside Elijah Mohammed and NOI, Malcolm himself was incredibly likeable and charismatic, something I suspected drew the whole colour spectrum to his speeches and rallies, may it be to support or not. The call ended with Malcolm asking if he could decide the place for the interview, to ensure his own safety. I obliged with little hesitation, and scribbled down an address that I recognised in downtown Boston. After I hung up, I threw myself to my typewriter and wrote the opening paragraphs of the article that would change my career, reputation, and quite possibly my life.

I was just about to order my second coffee when a group of people walked into the restaurant. They were all navigated by an immaculately dressed man wearing prominent glasses. He was incredibly tall, and when I stood up to greet him, I was considerably dwarfed. The men in his wake were tall, in suits, like him, but didn't give off the almost all-knowing, powerful aura he had, highlighted by his brisk walk. Even if there were a room full of thousands of identical men wearing glasses and suits, and someone asked where Malcolm X was, everyone would point an identical finger towards the man towering in front of

me. Malcolm sat down in the booth, crossed his legs nonchalantly, and faced me, looking me deep in the eye. I felt no hostility, but it sure did feel like something was being recorded. I was being judged. Calculating every part of my face and actions.

“Jackson, it’s great to meet you again,” he said, with a faint smile. There wasn’t even a stray speck of dust on his glasses.

“Wonderful to meet you sir, truly is an honour.”

He gave an obscure wave and ordered a coffee, while the men behind him muttered, looking at me. I busied myself with my pens; giving them a wide berth.

“Now, let’s begin.” He sat straight and placed his elbows on the table.

I was completely ready. “Yes, of course, now what I wanted to ask you first is about your recent departure from the Nation of Islam and your relationship with Elijah Mohammed,” I said breathlessly. Everyone’s eyes were boring into me. “I mean, what’s your input on it?”

Malcolm scratched his head and said, “Elijah Mohammed and the NOI have no longer any association with me. They’ve done the most they could, with their rigid teachings and all. Simply put, I’ve been a fool to think that it was ever the true way, the true way of Allah, that is. The Nation of Islam found me when I needed it, and now I don’t need it. I’ve outgrown what Elijah taught me, what I did to recruit those thousands- “

“Hundreds of thousands,” I blurted. My eyes widened in horror, but Malcolm laughed.

“Yeah, hundreds of thousands, but you know what, Jackson?” he said, his eyes glinting behind glass. “I’m a new man, a new man with a new name, I’ve broken free from the confusion I was swimming in for all those years. At the time, I thought I was free. I thought this was the new life made for me, under Elijah of course, and I poured my heart and soul into it. Until I truly realised that freedom, for me, for everyone black, certainly wasn’t under the Nation of Islam. My name was and is Malcolm, or Malcolm Little, the name slave owners gave my forefathers, Malcolm Shabazz, Malik El-Shabazz or Malcolm X.

And even with all of those names I can't change who I was. I'm Black. Not a black supremacist or Elijah's right hand, because I'm a guy for equality, and I'm a guy for Islam now, and this is the path God, Allah, Jehovah, whoever you believe in has laid out for me."

A murmur erupted from the men, and one of them muttered something like "Amen". I quickly noted down what he had said. I finished and looked up to see Malcolm looking at me in a reserved way. What he just said travelled through me; what was he trying to achieve now? Thoughts bubbled in my head and I quickly asked the next question.

"So, Malcolm, what are you going to do now concerning the civil rights movement. Is the "promised land" that Mr King quoted in the March for Washington similar to your goal?" I said, expectant for a great answer.

However, Malcolm looked at me, and suddenly burst into a little chuckle. The men followed.

For serious looking people, they sure do laugh a lot, I thought, as I swiped at my forehead. They stopped once they noticed my discomfort, and Malcolm gave the same look at me that he did at the start, calculating, but not necessarily cold. This time, it looked like he was trying to convey what he felt about my question through his stare. I was at a loss, so he spoke.

"Jackson, when I was a kid, I hated when adults said this phrase to me, but now that I'm a lot older, I often find myself having to use it," he said. "It was: "You'll understand when you're older". And I know what it means now. They meant I'll only truly understand once I've gone through it myself, and seen the aftermath of it, and how it will affect me and others. But I also know that it means I'm looking at it from a totally different angle, an angle that forces me to look up when I speak, to look at something way beyond me -"

"I don't understand sir, -"

He holds up his hand to show he hasn't finished. I quieten in haste, feeling his power stronger over me.

"Your perspective on this is wonky. Not out of focus, but wonky, Jackson. The March on Washington was held by a man revered by

the black community, but I've only ever met him once. Mr King has a way with words, and his techniques are effective, and I do respect him more now than I did, say, four years ago. But my opinions and perspective on this are still strong, and will be, till the day I die. And it's soon. My life's in danger, and that's why I chose to meet you in this restaurant run by an ex-NOI member, in a Boston street. I'm fearing not for my life only, but for my family's too." His voice turned grim. "I feel safe here, but, no, that's not what I'm here to say. That's not what I'm talking about, right now."

When he mentioned his safety, Malcolm's face darkened, and the glint in his glasses died out, like a stepped-on match. He shoved his hand on my shoulder and pointed towards the banner closest to us.

"By any means necessary; that's what I believe in," he said with a gleam in his pupils. "I said that phrase and I stick by it. Do whatever you can. Speak, rant, hold rallies, hold protests, go on hunger strikes, but will those who wronged us and claimed us as property hundreds of years ago, truly feel the pain that a hundred whips to the back feels? You definitely won't Jackson, and I'll only feel it when another black man gets lynched because of the pigment in his skin. What Mr King preaches is equality, what I preach is equality, as Malcolm Shabazz, and to everyone else as Malcolm X, but what I do differently is that I don't like waiting. I'm not a saint. I'm not a saviour. I'm a servant to my God, and I sure as hell haven't got any patience anymore. Why should I shake the very man's hand who considers the colour of mine inferior, and hold a speech in front of the statue of a president who wouldn't have even liked me, Jackson?" His voice was just about crossing the line of shouting. Malcolm then smiled tiredly and rested his hand on his temple.

I was still.

Malcolm wrote on a napkin, dropped it on my lap, placed \$10 on the table and briskly shook my hand. He stood up and walked away while I scribbled down everything I could. Finally, I carefully opened the napkin.

ORGANISATION OF AFRO-AMERICAN UNITY RALLY/
AUDUBON BALLROOM

21/2/1965

I TRUST YOU'LL BE THERE.

MALCOLM

I put it in my pocket and left, smile on my face.

KRISHNA GOWDA
Liverpool

Highly Commended by the judges

Background: *this story is set in India in 1947 during the time when India gained Independence from British rule but was separated into India and Pakistan. My story tells the tale of a young girl who has to abandon her home and cross the new border. This story is very personal to me as my Grandmother, Kailash, experienced these events as a nine year-old girl. I have based my story on her real life experience that has been told to me by my parents. 2017 is the 70th anniversary of Indian Independence and Partition. Learning more about it through TV documentaries and seeing my Grandmother's refugee documents inspired me to write 'Crossing the Line'.*

CROSSING THE LINE

Krishna Gowda

The sun crouched down in the sky, which was filled with wispy, thin clouds that looked like strips of silver. Somewhere in the trees, a crow called out and was greeted with a series of replies. Punjab was tranquil and at peace; so it seemed.

Kailash wiped her forehead as she gave the sun a fruitless glance in protest. Though it was summer 1947, and the tropical monsoons were due, the sun had furiously punished the people for so quickly dismissing its presence. The heat of the Indian summer was as oppressive as the wetness of the monsoon season. But it was not the India that Kailash had known her entire life. Things were changing. The British were leaving and Independence had been granted to India, but this was not the India she knew. Kailash did not fully understand what was happening – most of her neighbours had moved away, her best friend, Farah, did not play with her anymore, and her Father, normally a sensible, caring man, had been abnormally quiet and had worry written all over his face. He was regularly broody and meals often passed in silence as if a large weight had been put between them, preventing them from communicating.

Squinting at the orange ball in the sky, Kailash heaved the rusting bucket indoors and tipped its contents into the old, cooking pot that hung above the fire. The water hissed viciously and crackled in annoyance. Kailash looked at it apologetically.

‘I’m sorry but it’s for my baby sister’s bath,’ she explained, as she returned to the tap to refill the bucket.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps approached and Kailash hastily filled the bucket and tipped the water into the pot again.

‘Is the water for Sushma’s bath ready yet, Kailash?’ came the voice.

‘Nearly Dadi,’ she replied, smiling when she saw her Grandmother carrying her baby sister and her little brother, Subash, tugging on their

Grandma's sari. She stroked her sister's hair fondly but was interrupted by a rapid set of footsteps – it was her Father, Arjun Das.

'Hi Pappa!' Kailash greeted him, beckoning for a hug. Her Father ignored her and dashed into his room, grabbing all his clothes and throwing them onto his bed.

'Kailash! Ma! Pack all your belongings that are necessary and be ready in five minutes. A mob of Muslims is coming. They are fuming, like an angry swarm of bees and they are carrying weapons – axes and spears. They attacked the market and killed all the Hindus and Sikhs and set their stalls on fire! Now they are heading to our village and are burning down houses. Throw whatever valuables and clothes you can into this suitcase and bag, we need to go!'

Kailash gasped, 'But Pappa, what about Daddaji? He is still at Altaaf Uncle's house. The mob might kill him, we have to wait for him!'

Arjun Das swallowed a lump in his throat as he thought about his own Father. 'I'm sorry, Kailash, we can't wait. He will be okay, don't worry,' he lied.

Kailash cried, 'But Pappa –'

'No! We are leaving in five minutes and that is final; go and pack your things!' he yelled but choked at the end as the words sunk in. A tear escaped down his face but he turned away before letting the waterfall cascade.

Kailash's head was swimming with questions as she wept, silently, rushing to the room she shared with Subash and quickly tossing belongings onto the bed. She grabbed a couple of books and her blanket and stuffed them into the bag, unable to comprehend how they could be leaving the only home she had known for her whole nine years. Her stomach fluttered and her legs were jelly. Why were they leaving? Where were they going? When, if ever, would they return? And would she ever see her Daddaji again? She stopped. Her breaths were short and shallow, her eyes watery and her face damp. At that moment the realisation dawned on her that the rumours and whisperings of neighbours killing neighbours were a reality and were here, on her doorstep.

Kailash beckoned for her brother to follow as she entered her Grandma's bedroom. 'Are you alright, Dadi?' she murmured softly.

Her Grandmother vaguely nodded and suddenly stopped packing. She turned around and produced three golden necklaces from a cupboard. Each one had a pendant of Laxmi, the goddess of luck and good fortune. 'These are for you children,' she explained. 'Everyone in our family has one and in times of danger it will bring you luck and good fortune and it will always unite our family, no matter how far apart we may be.' She choked at the end, as Kailash gratefully accepted her gift.

'Even Daddaji has one?' she whispered.

'Even Kishen,' her Grandma replied, pulling her granddaughter in for a hug.

The metal caterpillar, with its pumping pistons, brass bell and charcoal chimney, rolled into the station letting out acres of steam as it took rest. Kailash fidgeted apprehensively as she grasped Subash's hand tightly like her Father had ordered. He carried their luggage whilst Dadi addressed Sushma tenderly.

'Do we immediately rush to get on the train?' Kailash had asked her Father earlier.

'No,' her Father had replied decisively, 'it will be a huge commotion and we do not want anyone lost.'

Kailash looked at the families enveloping them. Women crying, men glancing round in terror, everyone scared in case a mob would come. As the doors squeaked open, an ocean of people flooded into the carriages.

'Pappa, the train is going to be full, we won't get in!' Kailash exclaimed, in a panicky tone.

Arjun Das clearly had other plans and as the train carriages filled he pulled them forward and climbed, not into a carriage, but onto the top of one. Kailash saw other people doing the same. With the adrenaline rushing through his blood, Arjun Das heaved his Mother and children up and held his children closely as the train released a puff of steam and

a shrill, urgent whistle before pulling away from the station. Kailash looked back and a tear trickled down her face as she thought of her Daddaji left behind.

As the train juddered along the tracks she turned to her Father.

‘Why is this all happening?’ she asked.

Arjun Das sighed deeply. ‘Our country has changed, Kailash. India is no longer one country but is now India and Pakistan.’ He shook his head despondently. ‘Punjab has been divided, our home was on the wrong side, in Pakistan.’

‘But why does that matter?’ interrupted Kailash.

He smiled sadly at the innocence of a child. ‘That’s a very good question – why does it matter? Pakistan is now for Muslims and we are no longer welcome there. Likewise, across the border in India, Hindus and Sikhs are driving out the Muslims who have lived there all their lives, saying they are not welcome there anymore.’ He shook his head sadly, murmuring to himself, lost in his own reverie. ‘For centuries the different religions co-existed but the foolishness of grown men has led us to this fate.’

Kailash jolted awake as she realised that the train had slowed down and stopped at a station. Warily lifting her head from her Father’s lap she estimated how long the journey had been – two hours? Five hours? However long it had been, it felt like days to her.

‘Come on,’ her Father beckoned to her as he helped her and Subash carefully climb down. She glanced back, hardly believing she had journeyed on the roof of a train.

Following her Father and Grandmother, they began to queue in a long line, which resembled a snake. It meandered around the scorching, dusty area and led to a series of large barriers and stalls where officers in khaki uniforms solemnly checked records and registered those who had crossed the border.

Suddenly, Kailash felt a small tug on her dress - it was Subash.

‘When will we move back, Kailash Didi, I want to see Azil?’ he asked.

Kailash struggled to phrase the words that would reassure her brother and were honest. ‘Erm... for now it’s best to focus on our future here, Subash,’ she said gently.

He gave a comprehending nod and wearily took his Dadi’s hand, gazing out at the city of Delhi. Eventually, they reached the head of the snake and were greeted by two security guards who pierced them with icy stares from their expressionless faces. Gravely, they examined and verified vital documents and instructed them for several signatures before waving them away, disinterestedly. Arjun Das hailed a rickshaw, giving it a certain address before they departed from the station control zone. Kailash touched the pendant on her necklace and her eyes grew misty as her mind floated over to memories of her Grandfather, who had been left behind. As she witnessed the new sights of Delhi, with its skillfully crafted buildings, bright and exuberant colours and breathtaking features, Kailash’s eyes glittered as her brain tried to lodge the images in her memory.

‘It’s like a kaleidoscope of colours,’ she thought to herself dreamily.

As she marvelled at a family of langur monkeys sharing mangoes and guavas, the rickshaw stopped abruptly, a gesture that they had arrived. The house had a thatched roof and was a bungalow. Its cream paint was flaked with old age but it had withstood the torment of weather for over three decades. Its door was birch and had a rusting “19” plaque on it. It was not as grand as their old house, but it was certainly a welcoming one that would aid them in adapting to a new life, in the country they thought they had been in.

Kailash observed her father’s face; for the first time in months, his strained face looked like it had been relieved of its pain and had been replaced by contentment and optimism. The stress and peril of Partition had ceased - it was, at last, all over. Taking his hand, Kailash, Subash, Sushma, their Father and Grandmother entered their new home and walked into the threshold of a new life.

Five months later...

Startled, Kailash instinctively looked at her Grandmother who had just dropped the cooking pan with a mighty clang. Her Grandmother gasped and then a few tears trickled down her face as she ran outside and, to Kailash's surprise, hugged a ragged, old man who was at their doorstep.

'Dadi, what are you doing? Who is that?' Kailash enquired as her Grandmother detached herself from the stranger. Suddenly, the stranger removed something from his neck and presented it to the girl. Kailash's eyes were wide with shock and her mouth was open.

'No, it can't be. It couldn't be! It is!' she thought as the penny finally dropped. She bolted towards the man and flung her arms around him grasping him tightly, not wanting to ever let go.

Looking lovingly at his family, Kishen, Father of Arjun Das and Grandfather of Kailash, returned his granddaughter's hug as she led him into their new home across the border, having crossed the line.

VHAIRI JORDAN
Perth Academy, Perth

Highly Commended by the judges

THE TAY BRIDGE SURVIVOR

Vhairi Jordan

Thomas had lived on the streets of Edinburgh for longer than he could remember. Passers-by would wonder how a young boy of thirteen had come to be homeless, some pitied him, but he loathed that. Thomas preferred it when they looked down on him, their noses wrinkled with disgust. People even looked away, probably hoping that if they ignored him he would disappear, or maybe just telling themselves that if they couldn't see Thomas he might not even be there. That made them easier to hate, and easier to steal from. His father had taught him how. Thomas' father was the best pick-pocket in the whole of Edinburgh, he taught Thomas everything he knew. By the time Thomas was three his father couldn't put his cap down, as within seconds it would have disappeared. But his father never took Thomas with him. 'I can't risk you being caught by the police,' he would say every time Thomas expressed his desire to accompany his father on these dangerous trips. Every time Thomas was left alone, his father would warn him about the bobbies. 'They are arrogant and see pickpocketing as a heinous crime rather than the complex art it truly is, if they spot you they will take you from me. Stay hidden, Thomas.' Thomas nodded earnestly. He was safe with his father and he never wanted to leave.

Thomas' twelfth birthday had arrived. Rumour had it that some people receive gifts and even a cake, for their birthday, though Thomas didn't quite believe them. To Thomas such extravagances were mere tales, and he had a much better thing to look forward to. He was going to accompany his father to the central Edinburgh market, where only the richest wandered, their targets.

It had been decided the night before. Thomas' father had been dangling a carefully embroidered handkerchief between fingers with his back turned. He had told Thomas it was, 'just a little test,' and to take the handkerchief from between his fingers without him noticing. Thomas did as he was told, and to his surprise the handkerchief was

pinched between his fingers as he crouched around the corner of the building. Then his father had told him that he was ready.

‘Right, let’s be off.’ Thomas and his father had been watching the boats come and go at the docks for hours. Thomas subconsciously chewed his lower lip. Doubt flooded through him. What if he got his father arrested. Thomas’ worry must have shown on his face because his father turned to face him. Thomas had expected his features to be etched with worry. But instead he looked upon Thomas with his usual air of confidence and ease. He knelt down to his son’s level. ‘Remember all I’ve taught you, and just do the best you can,’ he murmured. Thomas’ father had confidence in him so no more self-doubt.

‘Remember to act like them’, ‘match your walk to theirs’. Thomas was trying to remember all the pointers he had ever been given. They had reached the market. Thomas glanced up at his father and saw he was squinting into the distance. Thomas followed his line of vision, and his gaze landed upon an ample woman with an empty basket scrutinising some carrots at a quieter part of the bustling market. The perfect target, she was rather large, so she must be rich to afford all the quantities of food she consumes, and the empty basket showed she had not spent her money, she would be worth the risk of the calmer atmosphere. They would need a distraction. Thomas’ father looked down and spoke in a harsh whisper. ‘I’ll make a distraction, you get the purse.’ Thomas nodded silently and together they began to move forwards, pretending to show interest in a stall near her. As she moved away, they followed. Thomas’ father glanced down at him. ‘You know what to do.’

Thomas fell back and his father sped up slightly, tapping her on the shoulder politely. ‘Excuse me ma’am, but would just like to ask where you got that splendid Macintosh, you see it’s my wife’s birthday in a few days and I have been searching far and wide for...’ It had worked; the woman hadn’t even waited for his father to finish his sentence before she began gabbling fervently about this expensive draper.

Thomas made his way forward and spotted the corner of a bulky purse peeking out of her breast pocket, she was too engrossed in the conversation to notice him reach out smoothly. But just as he was about to strike, a startling loud male voice boomed, ‘Get your tatties here!’ The woman turned, and her eyes found Thomas, his

hand outstretched, reaching for the purse. Thomas froze, the woman's mouth opened to scream and Thomas' dad yelled for him to run. Then chaos broke loose.

'POLICE,' the woman shrieked, 'pick pockets, over here, police, POLICE!' More people took up the cry. Police were appearing everywhere, a man grabbed his wrist, Thomas struggled but couldn't break loose, his father appeared and wrestled the man, trying to pull him away. The fingers loosened, he fought free and fled. Turning the corner, he glimpsed his father. The bobbies had him, he was being handcuffed. Then a bobby made a wild snatch at him as he rounded the corner...

Thomas had been sprinting for what felt like hours now, his blood was pounding in his head, but he couldn't stop. He needed a plan, the railway station wasn't far. He could jump on a train and return to find his father as soon as the dust had settled. In the distance, a bobby was scanning the streets, searching for him, so he ducked down a side alley. No one knew Edinburgh like him.

He hurtled into the station and ran to a platform, the bobbies weren't here yet, he had a chance. A guard nearby was shouting, 'Last chance to Aberdeen.' Thomas didn't know where Aberdeen was, he just hoped it was as far away as possible. He leapt aboard the train just as the guard slammed the train door. He was surrounded by benches, and scrawny men and women. It must be third class. Thomas squinted at the carriage looking for somewhere to hide. He had never been on a train before and he never thought he would, but his father had, once. He had told Thomas all about it, Thomas was glad he had because if he hadn't... Thomas couldn't bear to think of what would happen.

Thomas darted towards the luggage rack hoping no-one had noticed him in the hustle of finding seats. He swung himself up and shifted about until he was comfortable, but, most importantly, hidden. The train began to chug along the tracks. The door opened and he stiffened. He kept still. The ticket inspector moved closer, Thomas held his breath, then the inspector turned to leave. Then Thomas sighed and relaxed, his foot nudged a grey case, its owner didn't seem to have very many belongings because the suitcase was very light. It teetered on the edge of the rack, he willed it back, but it fell. With a thump, it hit the floor; the ticket inspector turned. He looked at the case in

confusion, then his gaze shifted up to the luggage rack. The inspector squinted up, searching the remaining cases for what had caused the disruption. Thomas shrank back into the shadows. After a few seconds the inspector knelt and lifted the case back up onto the rack and left, murmuring something about installing more luggage spaces. Relief washed over Thomas and he relaxed once again.

As time went on the wind got fiercer and fiercer, soon it was squalling faster than Thomas had ever experienced. He waited tensely for what felt like hours, his left leg was screaming with cramp. No-one came for him, which was a relief. The train screeched to a halt. A woman and her child were perched on the bench beneath Thomas. ‘What’s going on, Mum?’ asked the little boy, his eyes were wide with curiosity. His mother looked down at her toddler and answered patiently, ‘We’re just crossing the big Tay bridge, Robert.’ Thomas stopped listening to their conversation, and it faded into the distance as the wind grew stronger, buffeting the carriage. They were moving again, slowly chugging onto the bridge. Thomas felt uneasy, he felt a longing for safe stable land. He began to sway, he was panicking now, he couldn’t collapse on the train. But he couldn’t stop, he peered over the edge of the rack, looking for something stable to fix his eyes on. Panic faded as confusion grew, everyone else was bumping into each other, leaning first this way, then that way. It wasn’t him that was swaying, it was the bridge.

Terror enveloped him, his blood ran cold. He clutched the luggage rack until his knuckles went white. It was fine, Thomas thought, the bridge would hold, these engineers knew what they were doing, he told himself.

‘I’m never going on a train again,’ exclaimed a decrepit looking elderly man who spoke with conviction, but his face was chalk white and beads of sweat were trickling down his face. The toddler named Robert began to cry timidly. Suddenly the bridge started rocking wildly, Thomas rolled off the luggage rack and smashed into a bench, no-one noticed. Panic spread, people were screaming and running. Thomas didn’t see the point. Where were they running to? Who were they screaming for? Pointless. There was one last lurch then everything tipped sideways and they were plummeting down. He glimpsed people tumbling over and over each other, he couldn’t tell up from down. Then there was an almighty crash and the carriage shattered. Thomas was drifting away from consciousness, but he couldn’t give

up, he had to make it out alive, or he would never see his father again. Freezing water was rushing in around him and the desperate screams of those still conscious were muffled. Something whacked the back of his head, it was the suitcase that fell off the rack when the ticket officer came. It was as light as ever, Thomas would have laughed if he was not in serious peril, it was just so simple. He grasped the suitcase and glanced about. The suitcase wouldn't float for long, so he should find something he could rely on to hold his weight. He glanced about, saw the stumps poking out the water. They must be the what's left of the bridge, Thomas thought. He was beginning to shiver violently. He felt as if the cold was seeping through his skin and burrowing into the marrow. He kicked out, heading for the nearest stump, he saw his plan laid before him stretching out to shore... He just hoped the Tay wouldn't take him for its own.

He woke on the banks of the firth. His eyelids peeled back but he immediately shut them again, everything was far too bright. As it darkened once again, the memories came flooding back. He saw the water rushing in, and felt the chill penetrating his skin and freezing his blood. Then he was kicking out, clinging to an empty suitcase from stump to stump.

He was himself again and he knew he could never tell a soul of his survival. If he did the police would find him and he would never be able to find his father. Heaving himself to his feet, he crumpled into a heap once more. He looked out to the river. He didn't know where he was, but this was where he was meant to be. The river had let him live, when many others had died. He thanked it for that. He dragged himself to his feet and stumbled off, trusting the river to lead him to safety.

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